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Challenge, Chaos, and Collaboration: Two Weeks with Studium Teatralne

Katharine Noon

In July of 2011 the [Ghost Road Company](#), with the kind support of a Cultural Exchange Initiative grant from the [City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs](#) and the [Adam Mickiewicz Institute](#) in Warsaw, found themselves in Poland in the studio of [Studium Teatralne](#), in the Praga district of Warsaw. Walking up the stairs to their workspace, a little nervous and still a bit jet lagged, we were greeted by a warm and smiling group of artists: Piotr Aleksandrowicz, Gianna Benvenuto, Waldemar Chachólski, Martina Rampulla, and their director, Piotr Borowski. We took off our shoes and quickly got to work. Any formal introductions were brief as it quickly became clear that how would get to know each other would be through the work. Since language was a barrier, the work was where we shared common goals and pieces of a theatrical vocabulary.

This is not to say that Ghost Road's work and the work of Studium Teatralne are similar. On the contrary, our development process, up to this point, has been dominated by the creation of text over movement whereas Studium's work centers around the physicality of the performers. In the area of training Studium invests a great deal of time in very specific methods developed by Borowski and influenced by his extensive work with Jerzy Grotowski during the latter part of Grotowski's work in Pontedera, Italy. Ghost Road, on the other hand, seeks experts in various forms of training in the service of developing techniques that will serve whatever piece we are currently working on. Our approach is much more about scavenging the theatrical landscape rather than following a particular training or method.

Studium's focused physical work and training were a large part of why we were there. We were seeking to develop methods of creating a physical vocabulary in conjunction with our textual work. Both our process and the Ghost Road ensemble members are, at base, very physical, but translating the physicality of development workshops into the final performance has proven somewhat elusive. We were hoping to encounter techniques that would help us bridge that gap. Initially I feared our exchange with Studium Teatralne would be one-sided and that they would have much more to offer us than we them. However, as we began working together it became clear that just as we were seeking to expand our physical vocabulary, they were seeking new methods of creating text and integrating it into their performances. It seemed both companies were facing different yet complementary challenges.

One thing we brought to the table that was perhaps less obvious was the Ghost Road performers' sense of artistic autonomy. Our work depends on the expression of the individual points of view of each performer toward a shared vision. These points of view sometimes engender debate and arguments in order to work through problems and come up with solutions. I believe this somewhat chaotic process was new to the Studium performers but they seemed excited to jump into the fray.



(From left) Gianna Benvenuto (Studium Teatralne), Christel Joy Johnson (Ghost Road), Piotr Aleksandrowicz (Studium), Martina Rampulla (Studium), Ronnie Clark (Ghost Road), Waldemar Chachólski (Studium), and Brian Weir (Ghost Road) during Ghost Road's residency with Studium Teatralne in Warsaw. Photo by Mark Seldis.

Our first day together consisted of showing each other our most recent works. We presented short sections from an extremely early stage of workshop rehearsals for our production, *The Bargain and the Butterfly*, inspired in part by "[The Artist of the Beautiful](#)," a short story by [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) about a genius clockmaker who seeks to "spiritualize" machinery in order to create a clockwork butterfly that outshines nature itself. They showed portions of *The King of Hearts Is Off Again* based on a book by [Hanna Krall](#) about a Jewish woman in Poland during World War II who passes herself off as a German to avoid Nazi suspicion so that she devises an escape for her husband from a concentration camp. This is a piece Studium had been and is currently performing. It was interesting watching Piotr Borowski work with his performers as they went through the piece. He continued to direct and coach them even though they were showing a segment of a completed work. It was almost as if he was conducting as he spoke, cajoling and molding each performer in a different manner particular to each actor's strengths and challenges. Piotr only used these techniques in rehearsal or workshop environments. When Studium performed the piece in Los Angeles he was very much in the background, allowing the performance to go on without his participation. However, his intensity of work with the actors on this completed piece during our residency made one feel that they were at the beginning of the creation process.

This philosophy is a significant departure point from our work. In Ghost Road's work there is a certain amount of letting go and putting it in the performers' hands. This is not to say that things don't continue to change but as the director I'm not initiating those major changes once a piece reaches completion. Because collaboration over an extended period of time is at the core of Ghost Road's process I see my directorial role as one of framing and editing the fruits of the collaborative process and keeping the work moving toward the shared vision agreed upon at the start of the process. As a result the entire ensemble has ownership of the final work. Once a work is completed I am much more hands off than Piotr and most changes are related to content and then how those changes in content alter performance. However, with Studium Teatralne, the control and ownership of all aspects of the work lies primarily with Borowski. There are both Polish and American companies where the performers become a tool for the director's vision and are valued for their ability to carry out that vision just as it is true that there are companies in both theatrical traditions that are purely collaborative in their approaches. In Ghost Road's case ensemble members are valued not only for their ability to carry out a particular vision but also for their talent in contributing to and expanding that vision.



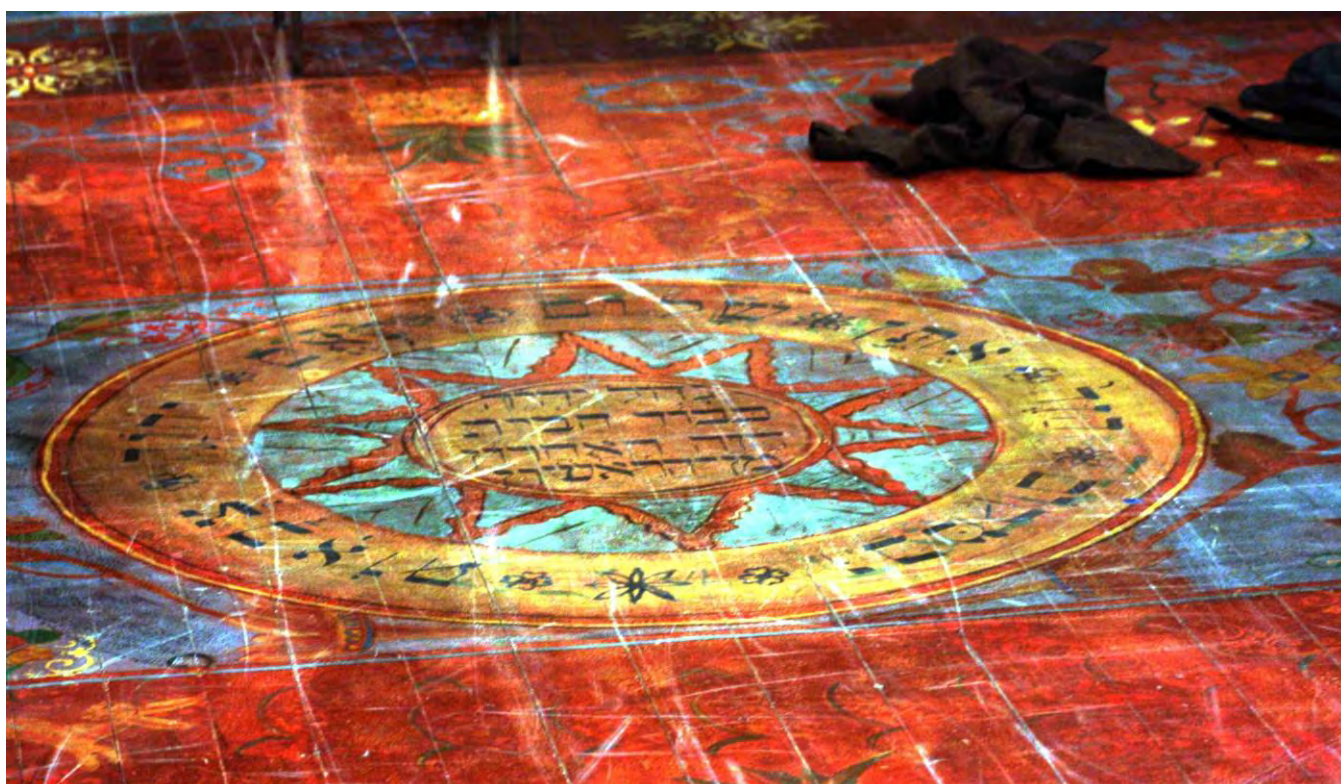
Left: Gianna Benvenuto and Martina Rampulla in *The King of Hearts Is Off Again*. Photo by Pawel Wilewski. Reproduced courtesy of Studium Teatralne.
 Right: Martina Rampulla, Piotr Aleksandrowicz, and Gianna Benvenuto in *The King of Hearts Is Off Again*. Photo by Pawel Wilewski. Reproduced courtesy of Studium Teatralne.

Once our initial showings were out of the way, we spoke about how we might proceed. Essentially we decided to split the days in two between Ghost Road's development methods and Studium's training. Piotr began working with members of both companies by going through a series of exercises that consisted of movements specific to each member of his company. They would move around the space connecting with one another through a very dancelike series of gestures. Most of the movement was on the balls of the feet and incorporated the whole body. The actors were to move from one person to another engaging with each other in a playful fashion. At a prescribed moment the Studium actors would launch into a choreographed sequence, each engaging in an exercise devised for the physical challenge each actor was trying to overcome. For instance, Waldek was always moving his hips, working on flexibility and Piotr Aleksandrowicz would engage in low strengthening movements. Gradually this section transformed again into another sequence in which they were connecting with one another from a distance rather than moving through space to greet one another. Piotr Borowski would choose music to achieve an effect on the performers. They, in turn, were very sensitive to these changes and shifted accordingly. Throughout, Borowski shouted, spoke, whispered to, and moved with the actors when he saw the need. The entire sequence reminded me a little of the Laban method shapes with the ideas of wringing, flicking, floating, slashing, and so on.

When the Ghost Road ensemble engaged in this work Piotr Borowski's coaching became more vigorous and somewhat confusing as it was a mystery to us when the performers knew to move from one sequence to the next. It soon became clear that the constant coaching on Piotr's part and trying to understand the overall trajectory of the work on our part caused frustration among the Ghost Road ensemble. They were used to finding their own way through things, and the fact that there was only one way (Piotr's way) at first made the actors bristle. However, after some time the ensemble began to let their guard down and give in to Piotr's methods and techniques. In exploring the process they not only began to understand this particular physical approach to performance and the flow of the exercises but they also learned a great deal about each other as an ensemble and discovered new forms of expression beyond what they thought each was capable of. I think it also helped that the expression of joy and sense of play embodied in the movement of the Studium performers was so exquisite that there was a desire on the part of the Ghost Road ensemble to capture an understanding of that ability for themselves.



Martina Rampulla in *The King of Hearts Is Off Again*. Photo by Dawid Sypniewski. Reproduced courtesy of Studium Teatralne.



Floor in *The King of Hearts Is Off Again*. Photo by Pawel Wilewski. Reproduced courtesy of Studium Teatralne.

When Ghost Road's turn came to share their methods we began with images used in the development of *The Bargain and the Butterfly*. Because of the language barrier, we stuck with simple phrases, both in English and Polish. One idea that is important to our work is using the circumstances at hand and integrating those challenges into the process rather than minimizing them. In utilizing both languages something new emerged that was neither completely Ghost Road's nor completely Studium Teatralne's but instead was its own unique entity. To begin the process, I had the actors split up in groups and begin to work with the images and phrases as well as physical, aural, and visual elements that created the boundaries for this short piece. In tandem with this, we also began creating a simple movement sequence, taking advantage of the Studium performers' movement skills. Once the parameters were established, I gave the actors a time limit within which to create something that had a beginning, middle, and end. There was a great willingness on the part of all performers to throw out ideas and begin moving through the work. An immediate sense of give and take and experimentation emerged that pushed both companies in new directions. Because we couldn't really get caught up in discussion, the creation process was one of constant movement and making "propositions" as Piotr would say.

For me personally what proved challenging and informative was Piotr's natural instinct to want to intercede and remold what the performers had created. As a result I had to become much more directorially hands-on in the initial workshop process beyond guiding the parameters of the work and assessing the success of each piece as it was presented. I found myself feeling a bit competitive and territorial, but I also could see the benefit of guiding more closely every step of the process, which results in a more streamlined approach to the content. However, lost were the unexpected and surprising ideas that other ensemble members would bring to the table. Having more than one mind on a problem can be a huge benefit as long as those minds are guided toward a single goal. When being more directorial during the development of pieces I felt more in control of the process, but the ensemble expressed a feeling of a loss of ownership. My challenge was to find the balance between trying a new approach to working with the actors but gripping it loosely enough that the ensemble's ideas could be expressed.

As our time together progressed, Piotr and I began working more in tandem rather than maintaining the line of demarcation between my time with the performers and his time. Gradually his physical work began infiltrating the more text-based composed pieces, and a greater sense of play and autonomy began to infiltrate the work in general. As [our residency](#) drew to a close, we presented the fruits of our collaboration to a small audience. Our presentation consisted of three parts: a section of what I would call a choreographed training session, a composed movement piece which was a hybrid of our two working methods, and finally a more language-based composition that dealt more directly with the initial material Ghost Road had presented from *The Bargain and the Butterfly*.

It was clear by the end that both companies had made a strong connection. I can really only speak for Ghost Road and myself but going through this challenging and intense experience has changed us as an ensemble and transformed our approach to the work. I think we communicate differently now, and our current piece, *The Bargain and the Butterfly*, is a testament to the expanded physical vocabulary we gained from our time with Studium Teatralne. I know we have only scratched the surface, but it has made a tremendous impact on us. I hope we have influenced Studium's work at least half as much as they have influenced ours.

As time has passed we have continued our relationship with Studium Teatralne, helping to facilitate their 2012 tour to Los Angeles to perform *The King of Hearts Is Off Again*. The piece was well received by audiences, but the critical reception was somewhat mixed. In the [October 8, 2012 edition of Stage and Cinema](#), reviewer Jason Rohrer writes, "That the heightened production smears into melodrama sometimes is not the worst thing for it. . . . It's an informative glimpse into a uniquely Central European type of organic, guru-driven small theater company. The acting is frighteningly committed, the style is refreshing if not entirely persuasive." In a similar fashion [other reviews](#) commented on the novelty of LA audiences having the opportunity to see such athletic physical theatre but questioned the content and tone. The form and performance style received the bulk of the comments from LA reviewers and audiences, except for those of the Polish expatriate community, who had a more direct connection to the subject matter.



Piotr Aleksandrowicz in *The King of Hearts Is Off Again*. Photo by Paweł Wilewski. Reproduced courtesy of Studium Teatralne.

In addition to their performances, we assisted in helping to set up workshops at local universities in order to expose young theatre students to this approach to performance. The company taught workshops at UCLA and Loyola Marymount University. In both cases the workshops were well received by the students. I was present at the LMU workshop and can speak directly about those students' reaction to Studium's work. What struck me is that students seemed hungry for this kind of training. They jumped into it without question and one could feel their level of joy at using their bodies in more complex and extreme ways. By the end several students were asking Piotr how they could come to Poland and continue to work with him. It was evident that this method of approaching performance had begun to open up new possibilities for many of the participants.

Ghost Road has continued its link to Poland and traveled to Warsaw to participate in the 2013 [Korczak Festival](#). It is our plan to continue to deepen our connection with the company members of Studium Teatralne and to continue the collaborative activities begun in the summer of 2011.

Katharine Noon is the artistic director of the [Ghost Road Company](#). Her directed projects include *Resa Fantastiskt Mystisk* in collaboration with Burglars of Hamm at Theatre of NOTE (Los Angeles); *The Clytemnestra Project* in collaboration with Theatre of NOTE; *Orestes Remembered: The Fury Project* at the Powerhouse Theatre (LA); and *Home Siege Home* at NaCl Theatre (New York). She collaborated on the development of *Stranger Things* and performed in the piece at the Ko Festival (Amherst, MA) and AVT in LA. She also directed the premiere of Laurel Ollstein's *The Dark Ages* for Playwrights Arena (LA). In Warsaw with Ghost Road she worked with Studium Teatralne on GRC's newest piece, *The Bargain and the Butterfly*, which premiered in LA at ArtWorks and traveled to Warsaw in 2013 along with their production of *Pantofelnik's Suitcase*. GRC is a member of The Network of Ensemble Theatres, and Katharine has served on its board. She is a recipient of the Lee Melville Award for contribution to Los Angeles Theater and is a professor at Loyola Marymount University.